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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001572

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SUBJECT: STUDENTS PREPARING FOR ELECTION DAY

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Venezuelan university student activists appear interested in using their widely-respected legitimacy to safeguard the transparency of the state and local elections on November 23. Their efforts, however, have been undermined by lack of coordination and socioeconomic tensions between public and private university students. Students on the public Central University of Venezuela (UCV) campus had been focused on the university's November 7 internal elections in which opposition-oriented UCV Student President Ricardo Sanchez won re-election. With less than two weeks until state and local elections, the students have pledged to provide as many as 2,000 election witnesses and 4,000 poll workers, but organizing and accrediting these volunteers may prove difficult to arrange in so little time. End Summary.

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OPPOSITION WINS STUDENT ELECTION  
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¶2. (SBU) UCV student president Ricardo Sanchez won re-election November 7 as the president of the central university federation, the umbrella organization that oversees public universities throughout Venezuela. Sanchez called on Chavista students -- who were reluctant to accept the results -- to be "reflective" because "we don't want violence but rather a language of university meetings." Sanchez's group, "100% Students," also won control of the university council. The election took place despite a confusing series of events on November 6, when the Venezuelan Supreme Court temporarily ordered the elections to be delayed because of a complaint from several students that they had been excluded from the voter registry -- a decision that UCV electoral representatives only learned of from the press. Later the same day, the judiciary restored the election.

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ACTIVISTS STILL LACK COORDINATION  
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¶3. (C) Sanchez told poloffs on November 5 that he and his fellow activists have been wholly focused on the student elections, rather than outside political activities. Regarding the state and local elections on November 23, Sanchez said they were planning a "get out the vote" drive focused on poorer urban areas, specifically Libertador municipality in Caracas. He criticized unnamed student leaders from private universities, claiming they were only working in places the opposition was likely to win, like Chacao, and were primarily interested in the media limelight.

He told us that the private school student leaders "don't understand" the challenges facing poor Venezuelans, a sentiment that highlights apparent socioeconomic tensions between students attending private and public universities. Sanchez said he has student leader contacts at other universities across the country, but admitted that there was little coordination among them.

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STUDENTS PLEDGE GREATER INVOLVEMENT  
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14. (SBU) Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) student president David Smolansky announced November 11 that, together with his Simon Bolivar University (USB) counterpart Juan Andres Mejia, he planned to launch "Mission 23rd of November," a campaign to guarantee transparency on election day. Smolansky pledged 1,500 to 2,000 student volunteers who would serve as election observers -- a key watchdog position needed at each voting station to prevent voting irregularities. It is not clear whether these students are already registered with political parties and are seeking National Electoral Council accreditation. Including students from UCV and the Metropolitan University, pro-opposition daily El Nacional predicted that as many as 4,000 student volunteers would be available on election day to serve as "members of table," or poll workers. Smolansky claimed that "our goal is to lower (voter) abstention, which was around 55 percent in 2004, and through this we believe that we will foster and defend the vote." He promised that the students would be in the streets and that "the electorate will feel our presence at every stage of the electoral process."

15. (SBU) Yon Goicoechea, who has received the most international press attention of Venezuela's student

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activists, was photographed in the November 12 edition of pro-opposition tabloid El Nuevo Pais with his arm around opposition mayoral candidate for Caracas Antonio Ledezma. At an event in the affluent Chacao municipality on November 11, he pledged that "those of us committed to change will support and vote for Ledezma." Several other student leaders were present at the event, including metropolitan council candidate and fellow student activist Freddy Guevara.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) Polling indicates that student activists remain the single most widely-respected group in Venezuela, even more so than the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it is unclear how great a role they will be able -- or willing -- to play in the run-up to elections. Although the offer of 2,000 volunteers for observation is crucial to fill in gaps left by the dearth of opposition observers, most universities are located in large urban areas where there is less likelihood of fraud. Both observers and poll workers must be registered, and thus live, in the district where they work. Student leaders have told us that they do not want to be used as cannon fodder for the opposition, but some more ambitious activists -- such as Yon Goicoechea -- are directly tying themselves and their fellow students to opposition candidates, which could erode the pro-democracy, apolitical legitimacy of the student movement as a whole.

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